

NET-WORKING WITH MACIUNAS

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Abstract

The history of networking in art has taken on a new quality in the 1960s with George Maciunas. His sophisticated Fluxus diagrams link together the most heterogeneous knowledge cultures, artistic trends and artists. Later, in the 1980s, when the ascendancy of the computer launched the concept of the network it became clear that the social network had been one of the chief characteristics of Fluxus. In fact, Maciunas built up an international, but selective network of contacts, which he then subjected to the explosive potential of his pictorial representations.

The net or network is an ideal metaphor for the interconnectedness of all things. With its nodes, joining lines, and multiple intersections it forms a complex system of relationships. The network is also a practical tool for transferring the metaphor into artistic practice. As a medium of action it is oriented towards participation. It requires a collective which is involved in complex patterns of exchange. This transfer principle was quickly appropriated by the historical avantgarde, and then translated into international networks as art and the avantgarde endeavored to go global. Hubert van den Berg's notion of the "supranationality of the avant-garde" is particularly apt for Fluxus. Its worldwide networks were, however, not arbitrary, but subject to normative preselection. As their initia-

tor, impresario, and protagonist, George Maciunas was the exemplary practitioner of this selection procedure.

Right from the beginnings of the Fluxus movement in the 1960s, Maciunas built up an international but definitely selective network of contacts. A good example is the editorial committee of the *Fluxus Yearboxes* (1962), a publishing project that aimed to be an anthology of Fluxus, to which Maciunas "appointed" a wide spectrum of American, German, Scandinavian, French, Italian, Austrian, British, Eastern European, Japanese, and Canadian co-editors. The self-appointed chairman took great care to ensure that all the lines of communication within this broad network of relationships returned to him—and he resisted every attempt to change this system. Maciunas even tried in the 1960s to instigate the kind of global collaboration and teamwork of artists that computerized networks have made possible under almost synchronous conditions since the 1980s—with the difference that he utilized postal services. His own correspondence indicates that he collected contacts with artists in the way that others might collect postage stamps. The communication in networks that he set up via international postal correspondence led to an interweaving of ideas and concepts that can add new levels of meaning to the concept of "associative thinking"[1]. This intensive exchange of ideas between Maciunas and his correspondents also had a structural influence on the Fluxus diagrams they employed

as models of interpretation and analysis, since these—like networked thinking—repeatedly took on the form of net-like systems of order. With the ubiquity of the computer, the concept of the network as used in electronics also became popular across disciplines—in sociology, psychology, and ethnology, for example, and it is now clear that the immaterial resource of the social network was one of Fluxus's main defining features.

The word Fluxus stands for internationalism. It is a Latin word, a lexical and therefore inherently international concept. The concept of *flow* that the etymology of the word *Fluxus* contains can be understood in terms of making the idea of the network fluid. After all, for Maciunas Fluxus was a "new wave" that he intended to permanently engulf all other movements in contemporary art. He tried to achieve this ambitious goal by developing a social network.

Social Networking

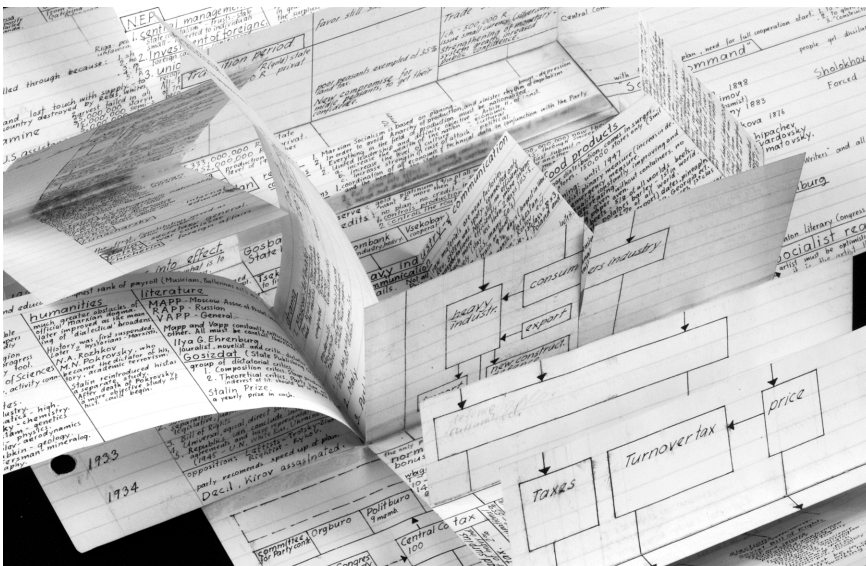
According to Italian communication theorist Tatiana Bazzichelli, the history of "networking" in art essentially begins with Maciunas's network-based diagrams on history, art history, the avant-garde, and the Fluxus movement [2]. Without doubt, Maciunas's elaborate charts interlinking diverse cultures of knowledge, art movements, and artists make him one of postmodernism's great networkers [3]. His fascination for charts and tables as the basic diagrammatical form was fundamentally optimistic, as it rested on the assumption that it was possible to understand large and complex movements and patterns in history in simple pictorial form.

Between 1953 and 1978 Maciunas created about two dozen atlases, charts, and diagrams, that together form a visually accessible document of the close interconnectedness of politics, economics, cultural history, poetry, music, and art.

The utilization of pictorial networks as a mode of reflection made it possible for Maciunas to occupy a central position within the Fluxus movement and to bestow upon it the status of an artists' International with an open left-wing ideology and a claim to universal significance. In his attempt to extend Fluxus into a global network, Maciunas may also have been guided by the idea of a new world culture, quite in the tradition of the ancient world cultures that he had studied so assiduously by means of charts and tables when at college.

With his phenomenal memory, Maciunas proved to be a veritable factogra-

Fig. 1. George Maciunas, *Chronology of Russian History* (detail), c. 1953–54. Ink and graphite on paper, 41.8 x 39.5 x 11.8 cm, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Gift. (© courtesy of Billie J. Maciunas. Photo © Herman Seidl.)



pher. He loved facts—the naked facts without any theoretical trappings. Dates, names, historical places and events were what mattered. His encyclopedic knowledge consisted of key words and numbers, of sound bites of information. This was what he had concentrated on in his reading of handbooks and reference works over eleven years of formal—and wide-ranging—study. Maciunas always focused on the historical facts in his diagrams, and not the extenuating circumstances, the dominant theories, the prevailing opinions, the pertaining atmosphere, nor the possibilities and limits of historical constellations. Pure facts were the structure out of which he made his own historical charts and diagrams, which, on closer examination, prove to be tightly woven networks of information.

Diagrammatical Networking

The art of networked thinking is to make complexity more accessible and to facilitate new insight. This approach was the key to Maciunas's pictorial and diagrammatic practice. There is no place in his "data highway" for facts to be associated with anarchy. Every tiny piece of information that Maciunas gathered over years of research was subjected to his principles of order. This compelled him to continually reread and reorganize the data in his diagrams of knowledge. Subsequent corrections, amplifications, and additions pushed him, however, to the limits of technical feasibility. Using a scalpel, he was forced to carefully cut out small items of information, often just a few square centimeters in size, so as to mount new ideas in their place. Each correction, however, also cast doubt on the encyclopedic diagram and the world of exact facts on which it was based. Creating a "territory" for his historical memory in graphic charts meant that Maciunas was continually rearranging his immense factual knowledge, and continually creating new relationships and networks.

Maciunas wrote the history of Fluxus basically with three charts. They all envision a geopolitical network: Fluxus as a supranational referential system, in which the poles of American and Western European Fluxus versus Eastern European and Asian Fluxus are no longer significant, as both come together in a single global network. This program of global networking was based on the utopian notion that the small-mindedness of nation states that had taken Europe into World War II could be overcome. The expansion of individually experienced spatial borders was intended to challenge

the relevance and necessity of actual state borders on both sides of the Iron Curtain, and this was to be achieved by forging meaningful links and networks between artists. To do this, local Fluxus networks, seen as social enterprises, were to be increasingly transformed into a worldwide network of artistic organization, whose topological nodes and edges could be represented pictorially [4].

Iconic Networking

Alfred H. Barr Jr., the American art historian and first director of the New York Museum of Modern Art, had created a groundbreaking model with his famous "flow chart" that appeared on the dust jacket of the 1936 exhibition catalogue *Cubism and Abstract Art*. This diagram shows the development of art from 1890 to 1935 as a descending and branching network and a causal mesh of influences and effects. Like many artists of his own time, Maciunas made a copy of this diagram. The Barr effect in modern art history consists in generating insight through visualization instead of increasing knowledge via processes of deduction. For Maciunas's diagrammatic approach, this meant combining pieces of information pictorially so that they produced a plausibly structured argument. Barr's evident influence on Maciunas can be seen in three ways: in a polarizing system of representation; in the use of a system of arrows; and in a genealogical structure.

The notion of polarity that is expressed in the Barr chart, with the avant-garde after 1930, split into two camps, is mirrored in the double arrows seen in many of Maciunas's drafts for Fluxus charts. Like Barr he thought in opposites, basically in dualisms like Fluxus and Not-Fluxus. But Maciunas was by no means a prisoner of these simplistic polarities. He was analytical and shrewd enough to explore and define all the territory between the extremes.

Maciunas's self-avowed aim was to continually and quickly update his catalogue of the major protagonists of Fluxus and depict their various degrees of affinity to each other. He distinguished between pre-Fluxus artists, Fluxus activists, "independents," and "outlets." However, a potential schism smoldered beneath the surface of the spatial classification model developed by Maciunas in his charts.

His unremitting drive to define Fluxus in contrast to other movements transmuted into self-destructive internal strife that threatened to dissolve the Fluxus artists' network. The diagrams not only draw

out the intertwined lines of development of twentieth-century art and artists in relation to their significance for Fluxus, but also and above all in terms of their importance for Maciunas. And he did not wish to keep the avant-garde movement alive at all costs.

By the time that Maciunas made his rapid sketch of a new flow diagram in 1973, his previous concept of Fluxus was already old history. Using a greater number of vectors he identified four generations of artists. This diagram, however, never went beyond the draft stage, perhaps because here Maciunas did not achieve anything particularly original except just another adaptation of Barr's diagrammatic model.

The same cannot be said of the Fluxus diagrams, which were created in free analogy to chronological, genealogical, and tabular representations. In these Maciunas had developed his networked structures of artists' relations that always implicitly included a strong element of judgment. As a result of the explanatory and also critical function of his charts he ran the risk that his contrasting representations would be dismissed as mere statements of opinion, particularly in view of the fact that he was continually shifting and replacing the nodes in the network of human relations he drew. In order to make subtle distinctions within the heterogeneous artists' association, Maciunas required a strict set of criteria, which he applied to himself and his fellow Fluxus members. The official membership fell from twenty in October 1964 to eleven in 1966. This drastic decrease shows that ultimately it was not the idea of a strongly knit collective that won out, but the pronounced individualism of its members. And thus Maciunas's attempts to create networked taxonomies in pictorial form expressed little more than the growing crisis of the artists' network that had come together under the intriguing name of Fluxus.

Notes

* This paper was presented as a contributed talk at Arts | Humanities | Complex Networks – a Leonardo satellite symposium at NetSci2010. See <<http://artshumanities.netsci2010.net>>

1. Roy Ascott, "Art and Telematics: Towards a Network-Consciousness," in *Art Telecommunication* (Vienna: Shakespeare Company, 1984).

2. Tatiana Bazzichelli, *Networking: The Net as Artwork* (Århus: DARK, 2008).

3. Astrit Schmidt-Burkhardt, *Stammbäume der Kunst: Zur Genealogie der Avantgarde* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2005).

4. Jürgen Barkhoff, Hartmut Böhme, Jeanne Riou, eds., *Netzwerke: Eine Kulturtechnik der Moderne* (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2004).